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ABSTRACT

A study examined the role of paraeducators as liaisons to the local community. Phase 1 of the study involved interviews with four paraeducators and three teachers, each of whom was part of a rural teacher/paraeducator team that used the paraeducator's background in the community to enhance school activities. Phase 2 involved five group sessions with 135 paraeducators, teachers, administrators, and others from rural Montana schools and with 70 paraeducators, teachers, and administrators from Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) funded schools in four states. Findings indicate that paraeducators interacted with parents, suggested school activities based on their knowledge of the community, assisted with arranging school activities in the community, had other roles in the community that enhanced the school-community relationship, brought local culture to school activities, and modeled community attributes. Their acquaintance with local families contributed to school activities. Obstacles to utilizing paraeducators as community links included concerns regarding confidentiality, insufficient paraeducator training, uncertain job descriptions and parameters of paraeducator duties, insufficient paraeducator knowledge of students or school procedures due to inability to attend meetings, and working for schools interfering with a paraeducator's image in the community. These findings were used to develop a series of videos to be used in training teacher/paraeducator teams. (TD)

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Utilizing Paraeducators as Liaisons to the Local Community

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UTILIZING PARAEDUCATORS AS LIAISONS TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

The purpose of this presentation is to describe the contributions that paraeducators can make to the classroom using their connections to the community and their knowledge of the local area.

Building relationships between schools and community can be difficult for teachers because of the time involved in making the necessary contacts for carrying out activities such as field trips, utilizing community members in class presentations, meeting with parents and incorporating community resources in class lessons. This can be a particular challenge if teachers do not live in the community served by the school or if they are new to the area and not knowledgeable of local resources. One strategy to assist teachers in developing community relationships is utilizing the background and connections the paraeducator has with the community.

Paraeducator is defined by Anna Lou Pickett (1999) as school staff whose positions are instructional in nature and who work under the supervision of teachers or other professional practitioners who are responsible for the instructional activities. These staff members are also referred to as teacher's aide, teacher's assistant, and other terms. The term paraeducator is preferred because it indicates that the position is unique within the field of education in a manner similar to paramedic and paralegal (Pickett, 2001).

With regard to utilizing paraeducators as liaisons to the local community, French and Pickett (1997) indicate the paraeducator's knowledge of the local community might be used to enhance classroom activities, develop work placements, incorporate community and cultural traditions into school activities, network with parents and facilitate access to community activities and events. As a follow up to these suggestions the presenters conducted a two-phase study involving special education teachers and paraeducators from schools in Montana and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) funded schools. All participants in both phases of the study came from communities with a population of less than 125,000.

Method

Participants

Phase One of the study involved unstructured interviews with four paraeducators and three teachers. Each of the participants had been identified as part of a teacher/paraeducator team, which utilized the paraeducator's background in the community to enhance school activities.

Phase Two of the study involved nine group sessions with paraeducators and teachers. Five of the groups involved representatives from Montana schools and four groups involved representatives of BIA funded schools. The sessions with BIA funded school representatives occurred at Bemidgi, Minnesota; Green Bay, Wisconsin; Phoenix, Arizona; and Tampa, Florida.

RC 023410

Table1. Group Sessions Participants

Participant Category	Number Attending
BIA funded schools participants	
Paraeducators	53
Teachers	10
Administrators	7
Montana School participants	
Paraeducators	73
Teachers	21
Administrators	1
Not specified	40

Procedures

Phase One: Unstructured Interviews.

The seven interviews conducted during Phase One were in-depth interviews. The interviews focused on getting information from three areas:

- What kinds of activities are implemented in their teams that utilize paraeducators as liaisons with the local community?
- What system supports are necessary to make such activities effective?
- What obstacles create difficulties for these types of activities?

The information from the interview was utilized to identify themes that would serve as the discussion outline for the group sessions.

Phase Two: Group Sessions.

The group sessions consisted of a PowerPoint presentation on the themes identified in the unstructured interviews. The audience was then requested to provide input on the theme or examples of activities they had carried out related to the theme. As the audience provided information, it was recorded on an easel pad of paper.

Following the completion of all group sessions, the information from the session recording sheets was input into electronic format. Copies of the responses were provided to four investigators. The responses were sorted for duplicate or similar examples or factors. Also, the new pool of examples was analyzed for new themes.

Findings

A dominant theme across the interviews was that utilizing paraeucators as a community/cultural liaison created a number of beneficial strategies for using the resources of communities to enhance educational activities. The participants described a wide variety of approaches related to how the paraeducators are connected to parents, can utilize community resources to enhance activities conducted in the classroom, can utilize community resources to create important education activities outside the classroom, and can utilize paraeducator community connections to create better communication with the community.

The interviews and group sessions provided rich description of what activities paraeducators are involved in that utilized community activities to enhance educational activities of the school. Understanding the variety of themes described under each topic provides insight into better planning and execution of similar activities in the future. The information is being utilized to develop a series of training videos to assist teacher/pareducator teams understand how to implement similar activities.

Activities related to the role of paraeducators as links to the community

Paraeducators interact with parents:

- Parents contact the paraeducators instead of teachers creating a "go between" role for the paraeducator.
- Paraeducators greet the family when students are picked up and dropped off at school.

- Paraeducators have lived in the community a long time and know parents, families, values, and culture.
- Paraeducators may work with the same child for a number of years and have developed a rapport with the parents regarding their child.

Paraeducators suggest in-school activities based on their knowledge of the community:
- Paraeducators know where to get community-based materials for the classroom.
- Paraeducators modify lessons to reflect local culture.

Paraeducators assist with arranging school activities in the community:
- Paraeducators have special connections for field trips.
- Paraeducators can assist with work placements for students in the community.
- Paraeducators know accessibility issues at community sites.
- Paraeducators are aware of transportation options in the community.
- Paraeducators know of community volunteer and service activities in which students can participate.

Paraeducators have other roles in the community:
- The paraeducator is a resource based on previous employment or a current second job in the community.
- The paraeducator is a resource based on their avocational activities in the community.
- The paraeducator is a resource based on previous education and training received that can be applied to their current position.
- The paraeducator is a resource based on the community roles of their family and friends.
- Paraeducators may be parents of a child with a disability and have contact with parent organizations.

Paraeducators bring the culture of the local community to school activities:
- The paraeducator may be fluent in speaking the local language.
- The paraeducator may know the subtle elements of local culture not found written down or described anywhere.
- The paraeducator knows practices related to local industries.
- The paraeducator knows local work standards.

Paraeducators model community attributes:
- Paraeducators can model employer expectations.
- Paraeducators can model appropriate behavior at public events.
- Paraeducators may have a child with a disability and model parent expectations.

Paraeducators' acquaintance with families in the community contributes to school activities:
- Paraeducators know where to find parents even if they are not at home.
- Paraeducators may have connections that can help with fundraising.

Obstacles to utilizing paraeducators as links to the community

General problems related to utilizing paraeducators as links to the community:
- Teachers' concerns regarding confidentiality include that it may be overlooked by paraeducators.
- Paraeducators' concern regarding confidentiality is it may prevent access to pertinent student information enabling effective student services.
- Multiple roles of paraeducators can blur the issue
- Lack of paraeducator training on the topic.
- Teacher liability when a paraeducator is in the community representing the school.
- There is not time for planning such activities.

School procedures can interfere with utilizing paraeducators as links to the community:
- Paraeducators are often unable to attend school meetings and are therefore unaware of changes in school procedures and policies when asked by members of the community.
- Schools do not provide position descriptions or define the parameters of paraeducator positions.

- Paraeducators may not attend Individualized Education Program meetings or have access to the records of students with whom they work, leading to uncertainty of the purpose of lessons.
- Paraeducator training is not budgeted.

Working for schools can interfere with a paraeducator's image in the community:

- A job description is important so paraeducators can understand and explain these roles to community members.
- Paraeducators are responsible for presenting professional images to the community.
- Community members, including parents, have thought of paraeducators as babysitters, secretaries, art materials coordinators, bulletin board decorators, and recess/cafeteria/hallway monitors.
- Community members, including parents, have stated that teachers should be teaching, not paraeducators.

Positive factors that support paraeducators as links to the community

Paraeducator/teacher teams coordinate linkages to the community:

- Team meetings at least once a week to coordinate activities including those related to community links.
- Paraeducators and teachers attend conferences together to ensure that both receive similar information and can discuss its use in their situation.
- Capitalize on the rapport between parents and paraeducators at meetings that include parents and teachers.

Paraeducators need teacher supports to improve community contacts:

- Recognition by teachers and all school personnel that paraeducators are school representatives.
- Availability of teachers to assist paraeducators in situations causing anxiety.
- Teachers and paraeducators can discuss the paraeducator's community background.

Teacher, administrator, and paraeducator skills that make successful community linkages:

- Recognition of the paraeducators' valuable community knowledge.
- Acknowledgement of paraeducators' significant contributions in developing community links.
- Teachers need to clarify roles for themselves and paraeducators regarding community link activities.
- Teachers need to monitor activities of paraeducators when they are out in the community.

These findings were used to develop a series of videos to be used in training teacher/paraeducator teams. Samples of the series were shown during the presentation to demonstrate many of the principles mentioned above. Videos in the series include:

Video Series

Introduction.

- The introduction includes a discussion of the changing roles of paraeducators and stresses the "three c's" as important to all activities involved in the series. The "three c's" are: confidentiality, communication, and a clear description of roles.

Paraeducators as liaisons to their community - In the classroom.

- Video demonstrating a paraeducator modifying a lesson from a book to demonstrate community attributes.
- Video demonstrating utilizing paraeducators to arrange for guest speakers from the community.
- Video demonstrating how paraeducators background in the school can help a new teacher prepare for meeting students for the first time.

Paraeducators as liaisons to their community - In the community.

- Video demonstrating utilizing a team of paraeducators' knowledge of the community in planning field trips.
- Video demonstrating utilizing a team of paraeducators to develop activities that incorporate information on local culture into school activities.

- Video demonstrating utilizing a paraeducator to coordinate the development of resources to support an extra-curricular trip for students.

Paraeducators as liaisons to their community - Connections with parents.

- Video demonstrating a paraeducator making a home visit with a parent at the request of a teacher.
- Video demonstrating a paraeducator using their connection with a student's guardian to a assist a teacher to become acquainted with the guardian.
- Video demonstrating a paraeducator contacted by a parent outside of school arranging for the parent to discuss the issues of concern with the teacher.

Paraeducators as liaisons to their community - The three c's.

- Video demonstrating various components of confidentiality.
- Video demonstrating various components of communication
- Video demonstrating various components of clear descriptions of roles.

Summary

The role of paraeducators has changed drastically in recent years. They have become a member of an instructional team. As part of the team, the connections that the paraeducator has to the community become valuable resources when developing instructional plans and other school activities. This presentation has shown how a number of schools have been utilizing these resources and introduced those attending the session to a series of training videos developed to assist other teams to make plans for utilizing paraeducators and their knowledge of the local community in enhancing a variety of school activities.

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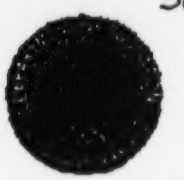

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